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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 002455

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/11/2019
TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PINR IR IZ
SUBJECT: PM MALIKI ADVISOR ON SYRIA, ARAB-KURD TALKS,
ELECTION COALITIONS, AND REGIONAL INTERFERENCE IN IRAQI
POLITICAL PROCESS

REF: BAGHDAD 02382

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Gary A. Grappo for reasons 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Sadiq al-Rikabi, PM Maliki's political advisor, told Pol M/C September 9 that Maliki was intent on hitting every pressure point available, including through the UN, to get Syria to stop harboring anti-GOI Ba'thists and allowing insurgents to cross the border. Turning to Iran, Rikabi emphasized that only Iraq's Shia could take on Tehran, warning that efforts by outsiders--whether Sunni neighbors or the United States--to directly counteract Iranian influence would have the unintended consequence of sharpening sectarianism and allowing Tehran to exaggerate its influence in Iraq. Rikabi gave an upbeat assessment of his September 8 UN-sponsored meeting with Kurdish negotiators on the issue of disputed internal boundaries (DIBs), but noted that KRG President Barzani would have to abandon his demand for a referendum if Arab-Kurd issues were to be resolved. Rikabi claimed Maliki is committed to forging ahead with a renewed State of Law (SOL) coalition for the national election. END SUMMARY.

"We Want Syria to Stop"

- 12. (C) Asked what was the desired effect of the GOI's call for an international investigation committee to examine the August 19 bombings (Ref A), Rikabi replied simply, "We want Syria to stop harboring anti-GOI elements and allowing insurgents to cross the border to spill blood on Iraq's streets." There was no doubt as to what Syria was doing, Rikabi said, noting that the United States had shared photos and other data with the GOI showing that there were terrorist camps in Syria. The steps the GOI was taking now, including going to the UN, were intended to demonstrate to Assad that Maliki was serious and was prepared to act if Syria continued to try to undermine the GOI in general and harbor wanted terrorists in particular.
- 13. (C) Rikabi recounted how Damascus had given up the PKK's Ocalan only after Ankara warned that Turkey was prepared to go into Damascus to get Ocalan and began moving forces to the border. Rikabi also pointed out that no insurgents crossed the Syrian-Israeli border. "Why?" he asked rhetorically, because the Syrians understood that there would be consequences if Damascus were to allow something like that to happen. These examples showed that Damascus would stop its support for terrorists and anti-GOI elements only if it believed that the GOI--and the United States, he underscored--were serious and prepared to take action. Pol M/C noted that the United States has long had concerns about Syria's activities in this regard and wanted to continue to work with the GOI on how best to influence Syrian behavior.

- 14. (C) Rikabi said he and KRG representative Rowsh Shaways on September 8 met as the HLTF to discuss building trust, integrating KRG and GOI security forces, and coordinating property disputes in disputed territories. Rikabi said the HLTF would meet again after the Eid holiday (about 21 September). He confirmed the objective of the HLTF at this point was to establish confidence-building measures and expressed satisfaction with tMQ7QQQQthat the Iranian government was "unhappy" that Maliki refused to join the INA.
- 16. (C) Rikabi dismissed rumors that Iraq's national election might slip beyond January 2010. Such a delay would appear as a failure of the democratic process in Iraq, he said. Pol M/C underscored that Washington placed great importance on Iraq holding legitimate and timely national elections.

Iraq Must Lead to Confront Iran

- ¶7. (C) Rikabi warned about repeating the "Lebanon experiment" in Iraq, whereby the major domestic factions become proxies of neighboring countries. Given Iraq's weakened current position, he said, Iran sought to support Shia parties while Saudi Arabia and other surrounding Sunni states were backing the most promising Sunni and "secular" parties, further stirring up sectarian tensions before the vote. Rikabi said if Da'wa tried to fight all fronts at once, "We will lose." Therefore, Da'wa must accept some "cease fires" in order to continue on, he said, hinting that the GOI might not be able to aggressively protest interference from Iran at this point. He advised the USG to discourage Sunni states in the region from interfering in Iraq's political process. "We don't have the influence you do with them," he said.
- $\P 8.$ (C) As for Iran, Rikabi stressed, "Let us deal with them; we know them and no one is better able to deal with the Iranians than Iraqi Shia." Rikabi argued that the Iraqi Shia would naturally resist Iranian influence as long as Iraq could count on the United States as an ally and if its Arab neighbors did not close the door to the Iraq. If others--Iraqi Sunnis, Arab Sunni states or the United States -- attempt to attack Iranian influence, it might be perceived as an attack on Shia. Iraqi Shia would likely recoil and defensively move toward Tehran, he said. Saudi Arabia and Turkey might complain about Iranian interference in Iraq, but if they were to criticize openly Iran's role in Iraq or try to interfere themselves, Iraqi Shia would become defensive, Rikabi cautioned. Given Iraq's history of sectarian tension, Rikabi said, if the election were to center around Shia/Iran versus Sunni/Arab, "we as independents" (i.e. Da'wa) will lose the Shia vote to the Islamist INA. Therefore, we must work together to resist Tehran's attempt to elevate sectarian identities, Rikabi advised.
- 19. (C) COMMENT: Rikabi, who is sometimes accused of having Iranian sympathies, now appears to see the clear political reality of sectarianism in the national elections. Chronically insecure Shi'a would likely circle the wagons around the Islamist INA, not only neutralizing Maliki but also setting Sunnis and Kurds in opposing camps. END COMMENT.

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- is, SOL would not fold itself into INA, but SOL and INA could form a new alliance together, Rikabi said. (Note: SOL, a grouping of Da'wa, Da'wa Tanzim and the Independent Bloc, participated in the January 2009 provincial elections. End note.) Rikabi acknowledged that the Iranian government was "unhappy" that Maliki refused to join the INA.
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